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JESUS CHRIST  
THE TRUTH-TELLER

A BACCALAUREATE SERMON

BY

Dr. William Reed Huntington

1893

TRINITY COLLEGE

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# JESUS CHRIST THE TRUTH-TELLER

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## A SERMON

PREACHED IN

CHRIST CHURCH, HARTFORD

ON THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

June 4, 1893

BEFORE THE

Graduating Class of Trinity College

BY

William Reed Huntington, D.D., D.C.L.,

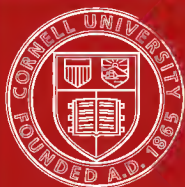
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## SERMON.

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MASTER, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man ; for thou regardest not the person of men.

Tell us, therefore, what thinkest thou ? St. Matt. xxii. 16-17.

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Religion, as the New Testament presents it, is largely a matter of personal confidence. The question is, Are you willing to take Jesus Christ at his word, or are you not? If you are, then you are a believer, and all that remains is to see to it that your life is made to square with your belief. If, for any reason, you are unwilling to take Jesus Christ at his word, there is still open to you a choice of creditable epithets, but "disciple" you are not and cannot be, for a disciple is one who accepts without demur the master's word. These Herodians and Pharisees who put the question of the text cannot have meant what they said. Had they been sincere they would have followed instead of opposing and trying to entangle one whom in words they declared to be a fearless teacher of the way of God in truth. But in spite of their evident hypocrisy they do us a service by

bearing witness to the moral estimate at which our Lord was held by his contemporaries.

He stood before the public of his day as a teacher whose honesty could not be impugned. The general belief was that here was a man who could be counted upon to tell the truth; and, enemies though they were, they did not venture to address Him otherwise than in harmony with this view of his character. "Master," said they, "we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man, for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what thinkest thou?"

What I want to accomplish this evening is to persuade you, young men, or at least some of you, that for us of these times there is no better wisdom than to do sincerely what those people did insincerely, namely, to take our hard questions of conduct to Jesus Christ, and to use our utmost endeavors to discover what He thinks about them, how He would meet them were he mixing in the social life of our day, letting himself be spoken to in homely phrase by anybody whom He happened to meet, shutting his ears to no appeal, hospitable to every interrogation as it came. There is, to be sure, no lack of teachers; we are overwhelmed with the multitude of our counsellors, and yet in the face of it all something prompts the cry, "Master, what thinkest thou?"

But look, for a few moments, before we go any further, at these qualifications of a guide in matters moral and religious as Pharisee and Herodian define them for us in the text. They are these: (1) personal truthfulness, (2) adequate knowledge, (3) freedom from the bias that comes of fear. "Thou art true," they said to Christ (recognizing his personal sincerity), "and teachest the way of God in truth" (recognizing his acquaintance with the facts), "and regardest not the person of men" (recognizing his entire freedom from timidity).

Now, setting aside all question as to the divinity of Christ and his right to rule our thoughts on the score of his having come down from heaven to do so, is it not a great thing of itself that we should have in Him one of whom even so much as this may honestly be said, that He is truthful, competent, and fearless.

No subject on earth is so important as religion. No subject is really one-half so interesting, if men would only think so. But whether you are willing to concede that religion has interest or not, that it has importance, and supreme importance, it is scarcely possible for a sane mind to deny. First of all then, we want, in any one who undertakes to talk with us about religion, frankness. If we imagine

that our teacher is designedly keeping anything back because he is unwilling that we should know it, or because he sees that the saying it may seem to imperil his self-consistency, or because others may be compromised by a too great outspokenness on his part, or because artifice is habitual with him, instantly it is all up with us as disciples. We cannot consent to be learners in a school where the teacher does not tell us what he really thinks. We want to be able to say without a particle of hesitancy, Master, we know that thou art true.

Many a man not conspicuous for talent, still less for genius, has had greatness thrust upon him wholly because of his personal truthfulness of speech and honesty, which is but another name for truthfulness, in action. His fellow-men have known that they could count on him to tell them what he at least believed to be the truth, and, without waiting for his canonization, they have put him on their calendar of the saints.

But in cases where the actual communication of knowledge is the thing desired, mere sincerity of itself does not suffice. Not only must our teacher be truthful, more than this he must have the truth in his possession. What does it matter how generous my friend is if in my hour of want he turns out to be as



poor as myself? There is still left, to be sure, the possibility of sympathy, but the real need of the moment is relief, and that he cannot give. These men who came to Christ wanting to know what He thought, were careful to assure Him that they not only believed Him to be truthful, but that they also were convinced that He had possession of the truth. "Thou teachest," said they, "the way of God in truth." By "the way of God" they meant what we understand by ethics or morals, or, in other words, the art of right living. By "the way of God" we understand the path in which God would have us walk. It is a simple figure of speech, and tells its own story without effort. But there is effort enough, as we all know, when we try to find out for ourselves just how the path runs. Christ Himself has warned us that it is a narrow path, and not half so easy to fall into as another that He names. And even when a path is well mapped out, if we are so unfortunate as to have twilight shut us in while we are still only part way on our journey, the need for some sort of a guide becomes urgent. Only an hour ago the marks blazed by the woodman's axe sufficed, but now it seems as if without an articulate voice and a hand that may be touched we should presently be lost altogether. What a great thing it is to have somebody near who

knows the way, and can teach the way "in truth"—with accuracy, that is to say, and precision; some one who literally can bring us "out of the woods"!

And so, just as there have been men who have earned the confidence of their fellow-men by their truthfulness, so there have been others who have earned a measure, equally large, of gratitude because of their mastery of the truth, their ability to guide. In every department the clear-headed are a blessing to their generation, but in no department are they more conspicuously so than in this one we are talking about—namely, the conduct of life. The mind of our time is grievously perplexed about many grave questions of right and wrong. The air is full of disturbing and upsetting talk as to matters which lie at the very heart of human life. We are asked to accept theories which, if logically followed out, would land us in blank and utter irresponsibility. Not that such theories have never been broached before; in the long history of the human mind they have appeared and reappeared a hundred times. It does not require a very profound acquaintance with the annals of speculative thought to be able to recognize behind the masks of the spectres who are trying to frighten us to-day, the faces of old enemies who have been making war against man's hopes for centuries.

But what is peculiar and distinctive about the fight as it waged in our day, is the general acquaintance of all sorts of people, young and old, with the state of the field. Questions which in old times were the special property of the schools of theology and philosophy, are to-day argued for and against by school-boys and school-girls; and by the kindly aid of the latest review even the lightest of the light-minded are enabled to discuss points on which the very existence of human society may be said to hinge.

I am not speaking of this state of things for the sake of denouncing it. One might as well seek to protect the shifting sands of our Atlantic seaboard from displacement by declaiming against the waves, as try to check by word of mouth these tides of thought that from time to time sweep across the consciousness of our race. Another hand than ours has set them in motion and it alone can roll them back. I am not petulantly fretting over things as they are, I am simply asking you to see and to acknowledge that things, being as they are, it would seem an unspeakable privilege could we but find one able and willing to teach us "the way of God in truth."

But not only must our teacher be truthful and competent. His natural outspokenness and even his

acquaintance with the facts in the case may fail us if there be the slightest ground for suspecting him of cowardice. Galileo was a truthful man by nature. It is impossible for anybody successfully to prosecute scientific research unless he be, at heart, a truth-lover and a truth-seeker. In fact, of all the debts owed to modern science, none, I think, is more real or more weighty than that entailed on us by the high estimate science has taught us to set upon the exactitude and accuracy of nature's processes. Religiously interpreted, this accuracy, this exactitude, is our guarantee for the absolute truthfulness of God. What He has said He will do He will do, and the evidences to this promise-keeping attribute of His lie all along the line that reaches from the atom to the star. So, then, it is more than the shame of a man of science, it is his actual disability, and works in him an unfitness for his calling, if he fail to entertain a lofty estimate and to maintain a rigid practice of truthfulness. And yet Galileo, naturally truthful as he was, showed himself capable of being frightened into a falsehood. So also did Cranmer,—for I would not seem by my one illustration to be discriminating in favor of the Church as against the University,—so also did Cranmer, truthful witness, honest man that he really meant to be, dissemble under the influence of

fear. It is easy enough for us, living our comfortable lives amid conditions which the efforts of these very men and of men like them have made possible, it is easy enough for us to criticise their unworthy timidity. To that one of us who thinks he could have had the courage to hold out his right hand to be burnt in the flame as Cranmer did, because it was the hand that had offended, to him let it be given to cast the first stone. Nevertheless, pardonable as Galileo was under the circumstances, pardonable as Cranmer was under the circumstances, what we are looking for is some one who under no circumstances can fail us. We are reluctant to be hard upon those men because we question whether we, in their places, should have done half as well, been anything like as brave; but that is not the question — the question is, Whom can we find to guide us with a guidance absolutely sure? Galileo dreaded the chain, Cranmer the faggots. Is there any one who, with all their love of truth and more than all their knowledge of what is the truth, is, at the same time, wholly a stranger to fear? “Master,” said the spokesman of the deputation sent out to entangle Jesus in his talk, “We know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man; for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what thinkest thou?”

Young men, I preach to you to-night Jesus Christ the Truth-teller. Your ears are more accustomed to other designations of His work and office. You are used to hear him spoken of as Mediator, Redeemer, Messiah, Saviour, Son of God, High Priest—He is all these, but back of all He is to be trusted as having been, as being, to quote his own words about himself, a man who has told us the truth. How can we render Him the homage that is His due in those other characters I just now recited unless, to begin with, we have learned to put our whole trust in Him? Monarch He is no doubt, and Priest, but Prophet Teacher, first of all, so far as you and I are concerned, otherwise how should we have been made acquainted with those still higher names of his, for we take all of them on credit?

Do you urge against me the difficulty of finding out just what may be the mind of Christ with reference to these hard questions of the day? Do you reproach me with having brought you face to face with an oracle which after all is dumb, and openeth not its mouth? Do you say, "Oh, yes, it was an easy thing to go and ask Him what He thought when there He was, and anybody with a tongue to speak could ask a question, and with an ear to hear could catch the answer." I recognize the

difficulty, but I by no means concede it to be a fatal one. Remember how many years after the Ascension it was that St. Paul used the expression, "We have the mind of Christ." That phrase has precisely the same meaning, precisely the same value to-day that it had when it fell from St. Paul's pen. It is as clearcut as the crystal whose sharp edges have survived the wear of a thousand years.

The nineteenth century just as really as was the first is in possession of the mind of Christ. That mind has been put on record, and we have it, and nothing short of such a revolution as shall destroy literature and annihilate tradition can deprive us of it. It is not necessary that a teacher should be present with us in the flesh in order to our being put in possession of his mind. In the *Novum Organum* we have the mind of Bacon, and in the *Principia* the mind of Newton; why not in the Four Gospels the mind of Jesus Christ? Yes, it is there, and all we have to do is to study it, and to work it as men work a vein of ore when persuaded that rich as it may have proved itself in the past, it hides still more abundant treasure unexplored.

The more pressing of the questions of the day are those that concern the soul. The mere cataloguing of rocks and of those masses of molten rock, if such

they are, we call the stars, is comparatively a small matter, when put alongside the problem of the destiny of man. Nay, I go further, and letting alone the race would venture to balance the value of the most poverty-stricken soul that may have looked out on you through human eyes during the latest week of your life as you have been going to and fro upon your errands — I say I venture to balance that against the heaviest and most resplendent of all the uninhabited worlds.

And what I say is this, that nowhere is there such a treasure-house of information about the soul, its needs, its distresses, its sicknesses, its aspirations, its delights, as stands open to us in the mind of Christ. Nor is what He has to tell confined to single souls. Here are all souls. The race is one great family, and more and more clearly we are coming, every day we live, to see that it is no more possible to understand one soul out of relation to all souls than it is possible to understand heat out of relation with motion, or brute life out of relation with plant life. As things are knit together so are souls knit together, and as breaths conspire so do spirits breathe an atmosphere that is common to them all. Here, also, if we would understand the truth we must turn to the Truth-teller, and looking up to Him who knew what



was in man, say humbly, but with an earnestness not to be misunderstood, "Tell us, what thinkest Thou?" Frank, competent, fearless, He will sooner or later, if we ask aright, give us the answer that we seek. Do not fancy that He is out of date, or likely to be superseded. The promise of all the years is His. While the world stands He can be depended upon to teach us "the way of God in truth."

Here for example, if you demand a test, is one of the burning questions of present-day religion. Is the power that keeps the universe in motion, wheels the stars in their orbits, tints the plumage of birds, and feeds the flow of rivers — is this a blind, unconscious force, impartially cruel in its dealings with the children of men, or is there fatherhood behind it, and a providing care? No thoughtful mind that has entrusted itself to the leadership of Jesus Christ will complain of being dealt with ambiguously here, for our Master betrays on this point neither reticence nor reserve. This is a matter in which it is absolutely necessary that we should know the truth, if we are to be religious at all, and he tells it to us promptly. Of the sparrows, you may buy five for a farthing, he says, but not one of them is forgotten before God. The inference is plain. Are not ye much better worth caring for than they? Yes, but can it possibly be

worth our while to approach, with such poor stammering words as we may coin, a majesty so high as this? Is not prayer futile? Nay, more than this, do we not convict ourselves of an intolerable vanity in entertaining for a moment the thought of speaking to this Heavenly King? Again, we have an answer from the same lips, "When ye pray say 'Our Father.'" It is not, "If ye pray say, 'O Force,' or 'O Law,' or 'O Nature,' or 'O changeless and unalterable doom,'" but it is, "When ye pray, (the habit being taken for granted,) say 'Our Father.'"

Nay, but I ask, you say to me, stronger assurance of the love of God than this. That in a certain sense and in a certain measure the Power unseen provides for the bodily wants of the creatures with which the earth has been peopled is credible enough. That He giveth to the beast his food and feedeth the young ravens which cry, natural history might teach us without aid from Scripture, but their case is not my case. They keep the law He has laid down for them, they walk in the paths appointed, and in their several orders, and after their manner, live as they were meant to live; but I, alas! I am tormented with a conscience. I see and know that I have wronged the Lawgiver. How can I think of myself as on speaking terms with this King to whom you would

have me say Our Father, uninformed as I am of any willingness on his part to forgive. Fire burns and water drowns, irrespective of repentance. They pardon no one, why should God pardon me? Here, again, it is absolutely necessary for us to be rightly informed if we would be at peace, but what of our leader, our light-bearer, is He silent, does He refuse a plain answer? Listen to Him, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee." He is more than prophet, it appears, this Christ of ours. He is absolver, He has power on earth to forgive. Clearly it is not without authority that He adds to the request for nourishment, "Give us this day our daily bread," the prayer for pardon, "Forgive us our trespasses." Surely He would not tell us thus to pray if forgiveness were impossible.

But you ask for some evidence of divine love better even than this, and you are right. The love which manifests itself through the distribution of bounty is good as far as it goes, for it is generosity as contrasted with stinginess; but even Nature shows us a parable of love deeper than this. The mother bird fluttering over her brood, and with unfailing and impartial care filling each tiny throat, is a beautiful sight, and images with absolute fidelity one aspect of parental love, but the mother bird suddenly made bold to

suffer, yes, to die, rather than let the nest and its precious burden come to harm, is a symbol of something higher than Providence, whether divine or human, it is the sign of sacrifice. For the love that costs the giver nothing we have respect, we rejoice in the possession of it, but does it satisfy the heart? Does it come home to us as the very best thing imaginable? No, there is a love mightier than this, the love which many waters cannot quench, the love which consents, nay which desires, in evidence of its own genuineness, to suffer. This is sacrificial love. We can dream of nothing higher.

Now is there anything in God that corresponds to this? If not, we are shut up to the disappointing conclusion, that in our human relations there is something more precious than we can ever hope to see realized in our divine relations. If our fellow man has something to give us better worth seeking than anything our God can offer, then is religion emptied of its supreme motive, the desire to find the very best. Again I point you to our pillar of fire. Of his coming He says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." Sacrifice, you notice, at the very outset, that sacrifice of which the manger is the emblem. But again, as the end approaches, this is what we hear: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the

ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit." "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." And this He meant of the manner of His dying. Sacrifice again at the very last, the sacrifice of the cross. Herein, whether first or last, is a love worth the calling such, for it is nothing else than unselfishness incarnated.

There remains one other question still, the question of the future — If a man die shall he live again? Will the leadership of Christ win for us the greatest of all victories, the conquest of the fear of dying? He leaves us in no doubt upon the point. "I am the resurrection and the life," he says, "because I live, ye shall live also." Fountain of life Himself, He becomes the giver of it to all who will receive. Other religions guessed at immortality, and dreamed of it; Christ's religion offers it. Spiritualists commend to us their ghastly caricature of heaven. Buddha, the light of Asia, bids us take comfort in the thought that as the raindrop falls into the great ocean, and survives by being swallowed up, so the soul shall find true peace and rest in an everlasting forgetfulness. Comte urges us to expel the subject from our thoughts, and to be content with the immortality of the race. The Son of Mary, separate

from them all, stands forth and says, "In my Father's house there are abiding places many. I go to make ready one of them for you."

You see how generous is the territory in which, under the leadership of the Christ, conquests may be made and held. The being and the fatherhood of God, the reasonableness of prayer, the possibility of forgiveness, the measureless intensity of the love that reaches us through sacrifice, the confident expectation of a life to come, are these gains on the side of belief inconsiderable? Nay, are they not fruits of victory for which we cannot too vehemently or too fervently give thanks? But you complain that this cumulative argument of mine makes everything hinge upon personal confidence in the testimony of a single witness; one, who in his day and time, called Himself Son of Man. So it does. You are quite right. I have no wish to evade the point. On the contrary, I desire to urge it with all my might. You say, What are the credentials of this Christ that we should be called upon thus to recognize Him as Supreme Pontiff of mankind? His credentials, I answer, are his words and his works. His words live for us in the Gospels, fresh as on the day when they were first spoken, germinant with life and prodigal of light as never other words have been. His works? They

are around us. Christendom is His architecture. Who has ever builded as He builds? The city, to be sure, is far from perfect. It has its empty spaces, its half-finished streets and squares. Here and there are pedestals for which the statues are not ready, and niches waiting to be filled. In all directions there is room for growth, and in many, room for betterment; but take it for all in all, was there ever city like it, ever one so firmly founded, ever one so generously laid out? And all this marvellous Christendom, this unmatched social fabric is his work. He made it as really as the great Tsar made Petersburg, or Constantine his eastern capital. Has he not, as architect of such a city of God, some claim on our attention, some right to be heard in those matters upon which, with unmistakable authority in his voice, he speaks? I grant you that it is possible to reject Him as your light-bearer, but is it wise?

Trust Him, then, I say, both for His words and for His works.

Gentlemen of the graduating class, I rejoice to believe that you are going out into life persuaded that what Jesus Christ says is true. Such faith will safeguard you to an extent you little dream, and in ways of which thus far you have had slight experience. The huge battleship which, day before yesterday,

under a clear sky, sank like lead in the mighty waters, went down because she had lost her balance. Could she have been held level for only a few moments longer, it might have been possible to close the compartments and stop the leak ; but the instant she began to careen, the heavy armament of the upper deck made righting her impossible.

On this ocean that we call our life, no land-locked sea like the Mediterranean, but one that reaches far out into the infinity, many are they who suffer shipwreck. It is not always the seamanship that is at fault. Of the voyagers who come to grief there are not a few who have had, as we say, every advantage, who are versatile, who are accomplished. The trouble is lack of balance. This needed element is the very thing that faith in Jesus Christ supplies. Authority is the force that gives stability to life. What we need is to know ourselves to be under authority, rightful authority. Steadied and balanced by this central weight, we ride the waves in safety, for far more reassuring than the famous "Fear not, you carry Cæsar," ought to be for you and me, "Fear not, you carry Christ."









